



Meet *your* makers

Local Etsy artists' passions bring delight for customers at popular markets – as well as pay the bills



BY JUANITA METZGER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE MARTZ

A preteen girl hugs her new meditation cushion. She all but glows as she turns the handmade purchase to admire the cute owl on the fabric. “Do you love it?” her mom asks. Her daughter nods as they step away from the booth with its colourful bolsters, mats and eye pillows.

A twenty-something couple consult a list as they tow their shopping trolley between the aisles of vendors. They discuss which booths to visit first and the things they hope to find: a décor item to spruce up the living room and a gift for friends expecting their first baby. The woman admits she’s also open to surprises – perhaps they will spot something cool and unusual. Clearly, they’ve come to this RIM Park event intending to make some purchases.

These are exactly the kind of experiences and interactions organizers Erin Leroux and Jessica Murphy expect to see at an Etsy Made in Canada event showcasing products by local independent artists and makers.

“Customers love finding something unique that was made by the person who’s taking their money,” Leroux explains.

The Etsy Waterloo Region events are the “in-real-life” version of the wildly popular Etsy.ca, an online marketplace for one-of-a-kind, handmade items. Potters, designers, jewellers, sewists, knitters and crafters – who, according to the Etsy website, “put their heart and soul into making something special” – use the platform to sell directly to customers.

In her eight years as an Etsy online business owner, Leroux has witnessed all things handmade move from niche market to mainstream.

“It’s about the authentic connection between seller and customer, and there



Instock collections for immediate delivery

...We Have Gone Inside

330 Weber St. N. Waterloo
519.747.3818

HAUSER
shophauser.com

WOVEN CONCEPT RUG GALLERY

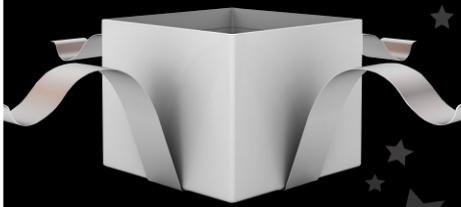
TRADITIONAL • CONTEMPORARY • TRANSITIONAL



283 Northfield Drive East, Waterloo
519.208.2801 • www.wovenconcept.com



**HOLIDAY FASHION
OPEN HOUSE**
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8TH
12-5PM



Unique Boutique



26 Young Street East
(at Regina) Waterloo
519.884.1945



is a growing demographic of people who simply want a more intimate experience of meeting vendors in person, getting to know them as people, and understanding what inspires their work,” says Leroux, a Kitchener-based graphic designer.

It's not just about the transactional sale.

Murphy, a Kitchener resident who sells jewelry through her online Etsy shop, hosted the first local Etsy Made in Canada event in the fall of 2014 in downtown Kitchener. Leroux participated as a vendor with her well-established Etsy business, Merrily Designs. She sold cards, invitations, wine labels and paper goods created with her own designs.

More than 1,400 people poured into the Walper Hotel that Saturday, a more successful event than either of the two women could have imagined.

Then, in spring 2015, Leroux participated in an Etsy Made in Canada section of the One of a Kind Show in Toronto. Networking with other vendors sparked some exciting ideas to support, train and mentor emerging Etsy businesses.

Encouraged by staff at Etsy Canada, Leroux approached Murphy with her ideas for engagement. Their collaboration launched a fall 2015 Etsy Made in Canada show, this time in a larger venue.



Valerie Simpson

Since then, the shows have been a local success story. In November 2017, 5,500 patrons flooded the RIM Park venue, and total sales reported by vendors exceeded \$167,000. Booths feature a wide variety of products including cosmetics, vegan handbags, beeswax food wraps, custom map pins, hot sauces and nut butters.

Beyond the shows, Murphy and Leroux hatched plans for Etsy 101 workshops to help others move their passions and ideas into the online realm. They partnered with the Waterloo Region Small Business Centre to host the 101 workshops in Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge and farther afield in Stratford and Brantford.

As well, they developed a full-day Etsy Bootcamp for mature sellers and those wanting more in-depth knowledge while setting up their online shop. With more than a decade of Etsy business experience between them, the two women had loads of



insight and strategy to save others from the hassles they learned by trial and error.

But stepping through the nuts and bolts of opening an Etsy shop wasn't the only goal. Leroux and Murphy have also facilitated networking, mentoring and an exchange of skills among the local community of sellers.

Leroux and Murphy's various initiatives have encouraged and inspired numerous entrepreneurs. Here are just a few of those who will be vendors at this fall's show, Nov. 24 at RIM Park in Waterloo:

- Etsy 101 workshops helped Valerie Simpson make the shift into a full-time Etsy business after she was restructured out of her job in March 2015. Until then, Hound Corner, her gourmet dog-treat bakery, existed only for her own dogs, those of friends and family, and a few school and church craft sales.

The workshops not only encouraged her to take the leap, but they also outlined the practical steps forward. “I needed help with my photography,” she says with a laugh. It's true that well-staged photos, with good lighting, improve sales.

Simpson, who bakes in her Hespeler kitchen in Cambridge, sells some of her unusually flavoured dog treats – blueberry coconut, pumpkin or peanut butter



Erin Leroux

bacon, to name just a few – in clear glass jars with brightly spray-painted dog breed figurines. Great photography has helped her market these items as custom orders. At Etsy shows, she often receives requests for an owner's dog breed in specific colours.

- It was a community connection that brought Kitchener potter Jaci Ryan to a 2015 show as a vendor. Leroux knew Ryan's distinct, nature-inspired pottery – Jacpot – from Instagram, several local coffee shops and as a fixture in other handmade shows. The show had no potters, so Leroux invited Ryan to participate.

Even though Ryan had a minimal presence on Etsy in 2015, it was the boost she needed to move more intentionally into the online market.

Ryan, also a trained chef, first learned pottery because she wanted to make beautiful things for her own home. Positive feedback at her first craft shows encouraged her to spend more time on the wheel as her

CENTURY 21
Heritage House Ltd.
BROKERAGE
The RED CARPET Crew

*Raising the Standard
of Your
Real Estate Experience*

**Roger &
Julie D. Martin**
Sales Representatives

OUR TEAM OFFICE
Unit 8 - 300 Gage Avenue
Kitchener, Ontario
519.888.9977

519.580.3505
julie.martin@century21.ca

519.575.3505
roger.martin@century21.ca



www.TheRedCarpetCrew.com

* Independently Owned & Operated. ®/TM Trademarks owned by Century 21 Real Estate LLC, used under license or authorized sub-license. © 2012 Century 21 Canada Limited Partnership.



Jon Johnson

customers became regulars.

A combination of in-person events, virtual sales and networking helped Ryan branch out to the wholesale market. Her pottery now sells at stores in Elora, Guelph and Arthur. She also collaborated with Innocente Brewing Company in Waterloo to make the personalized mugs available in-house for their regular Mug Club Members, another networked connection.

• Jon Johnson's journey into online sales was also an exploration in figure-it-out-as-you-go. A Kitchener-based self-taught graphic designer and screen-printer who runs Bearface Design, Johnson's approach has been to "make what I like and think is cool" – products that also happen to connect with other people.

He started his Etsy shop with two products – screen-printed handkerchiefs and coasters. The original coaster design is still a popular seller today.

Johnson says "people like buying things from people," which is why his work and style is very much connected to who he is

as a person. Now that he has participated in several Etsy shows, people seek him out to get the newest design of his T-shirts, stickers, enamel pins or beer glasses.

But when Johnson opened his Etsy shop in 2010, he didn't know any other local vendors; he relied on his



Jaci Ryan

own capacity to figure it out. Johnson credits Leroux and Murphy for their efforts at community-building. He views his relationships with other sellers as co-operation rather than competition. Their casual get-togethers are a space where people share knowledge, expertise and creative ideas.

The demand for quality products made by people you can meet face-to-face shows no sign of slowing down.

For Leroux and Murphy, this means they will keep co-ordinating the local Etsy shows several times a year, curating a juried selection of vendors. By the end of this year, the pair will have 10 market-style events under their belts.

But they are not content to rest on the show successes.

Independent making is mostly a solitary venture – such is the nature of a one-person business, whether it's full time or a side hustle. Leroux and Murphy have seen the value of connecting people, so facilitating mentoring and networking meet-ups and hosting topic-related gatherings about holiday preparation or marketing ideas keep them busy in between shows.

Leroux still recalls the excitement and fear she felt leaving her full-time, secure job to launch Merrily Designs on Etsy in 2013. But five years later she is still thrilled to be following that line in a children's nursery rhyme: "Merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream."

She is committed to helping others follow their passions and fulfill their own dreams too. 

ETSY WATERLOO REGION

The vendors featured in this article – plus 75 more – plan to be at the Etsy Holiday Market on Saturday, Nov. 24, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., at RIM Park, 2001 University Ave. E., Waterloo.

For more on Etsy Waterloo Region:

www.etsywaterlooregion.com

Turning your *dreams* into reality.



JWS
Woodworking & Design Inc.
1986

Complete Renovation solutions for your home.
519-886-0444 | Waterloo, ON | www.jwswoodworking.com